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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001482

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/06/2014

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: HILL TAMIL PARTY GIVES GOVERNMENT
RAZOR-THIN MAJORITY

Classified By: CDA JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

CEYLON WORKERS NOW WORKING FOR THE GOVERNMENT

11. (U) Sealing a long-anticipated move, on September 5 Arumugan Thondaman, head of the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC), announced that his party's eight MPs will support the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga. The CWC switch means that Kumaratunga's fragile coalition government can count on 114 votes in the 225-seat Parliament as it heads toward a vote on the budget and other controversial measures, securing the President the crucial--if razor-thin--majority that has eluded her since her patchwork alliance won elections in April. The CWC has, with only rare exception, traditionally supported the opposition United National Party (UNP), including during the last government.

NATIONAL INTEREST OR POLITICAL GAMESMANSHIP?

12. (SBU) When asked what prompted the CWC decision at this particular moment, party stalwarts offered two differing analyses. Faizer Mustapha, an MP from Kandy who is close to the party leader, cited such politically disinterested motives as the party's desire for a stable government to advance the peace process and much-needed economic programs. Mustapha denied that the CWC had been promised any ministerial slots in exchange.

13. (C) CWC MP Vadivel Putrasigamini, on the other hand, identified more parochial concerns, such as inroads made by other parties into the CWC's traditional constituencies, as the primary impetus. In particular, Putrasigamini highlighted growing concern at "the JVP (Janatha Vimukti Peramuna, a member of the government alliance) infiltrating into the plantations" that constitute the CWC's traditional stronghold. In addition, the CWC hopes to garner political credit for the economic development programs the government has committed to conducting. Sitting in the Opposition makes that hard to do, Putrasigamini observed candidly. Finally, supporting the government will help the CWC more effectively oppose a controversial hydropower project proposal, which, if implemented, could involve the resettlement of key portions of the CWC electorate, he concluded. When asked if the CWC move were also intended to support government efforts to advance the peace process, he responded, "That, too." In exchange, he suggested, the CWC will gain one ministerial portfolio--possibly Estate Infrastructure--as well as two slots for deputy ministers.

COMMENT

14. (C) A decade ago, the CWC, with its solid voter base of Indian "hill" Tamils on tea estates in Nuwara Eliya and Badulla, was the third largest party and thus the uncontested "kingmaker" in a political landscape dominated by the two national giants, the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) and the UNP. Since then, however, in the reconfiguration of political alliances and the proliferation of new parties, the CWC's ranking in the current Parliament has slipped to an unimpressive seventh place--trailing behind the rabble-rousing JVP, the jingoist Jathika Hela Urumaya and even the badly splintered Sri Lanka Muslim Congress. To preserve its endangered political prestige, the CWC needs to demonstrate to its constituents that it can still deliver the goods. As Putrasigamini observed, aligning itself with the Government seems the most practical way to do so.

15. (C) Comment (continued): The Government has been uncharacteristically quiet about the CWC cross-over. Perhaps this atypical reserve signals that the President, whose narrow one-seat majority still hinges on the volatile, unpredictable JVP, realizes that she is not out of the woods yet. That test will come during the current session of Parliament, which opened September 7, when she must call on

the support of her motley alliance to pass the first
legislation of her administration.
ENTWISTLE